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THE ADVENTURES OF A POETRY- READER

BY EDITH FRANKLIN WYATT

I

At the age of sixteen I used to attend daily with two admired and beloved friends of my own age a class in Greek poetry, a class surrounded for me with the golden light of an especial charm. Our studies were pursued in the rather dim, high-ceilinged back parlor of the Higher School for Girls in a brick house in a row, a house like a thousand other houses on an elm-lined street in Chicago.

From the carpet of the back parlor we used to step into a country never known before, never to be seen again by us in quite the same splendor. Misted as the ways were by our ignorance, it seemed all a wide lighted glory of Greek figures, of plunging hosts, of the sweep of the *poluphlois-boio thalasses*, of the twanging silver arrows of Apollo, the fall of the pestilence upon the camp—a world of superb beauty on shores undreamed.

It is this that one asks of a poet I think—at least it is this that I ask—that he take me to a world of his own. It makes no difference whether the world is little or large. It may be high-vaulted as Homer's, or as comfortably insular as that land in which it is so pleasant to know Mr. Lear who has written such volumes of stuff, or that confined, bizarre region inhabited by the gifted linguist who sings the inimitable lyrics about

I don't know anything more sweet
As sit him in some gay parterre
And snuff one up the perfume sweet
Of every roses buttoning there.

The character of the poet's imaginary country may be whatever anyone will. But one likes to have him follow

the Spanish proverb and after supper take a walk that is on his own ground. No one, or not many people, will care, either, about the poet's medium, or whether it is Debussy, or Manet, or Poe, or Maeterlinck who takes us to his own world. Or perhaps his world will have a clear correspondence to some actual portion of the globe, and yet be entirely his own, like the world of Burns, or James Whitcomb Riley, or Mistral, or Whitman.

II

It was not until many years after the Greek epic, the panorama of the Trojan war swam into our ken in Miss R.'s back-parlor that I read our own epic, the panorama of *Drum-Taps*, *Ashes of Soldiers*, *Marches Now the War Is Over*. Controversy over Whitman's metrical method and his right to express his ideas concerning sex have distracted comment unduly from one of his largest merits—his skill in an enormous free-hand drawing of the spirit of a people during a great social and military crisis. In this power Homer and Tolstoi are I think his only peers; and you need only compare on one side the handling of the *Iliad*, *War and Peace* and *Marches Now the War Is Over*, with the general outline of the romantic grace of the *Aeneid* on the other to see the difference between the poet whose interests are all personal, and so-to-speak, private, and the poet who can limn the portrait of a nation, and speak "the silent spirit of unconscious masses."

This interest—the mere excitement of Whitman's tale of our own fate as a democracy was when I first read him so strong as to obliterate everything else. It was like seeing something you had always known in a wonderful moving picture, something idealized in this case, but amazingly real and recognizable, something walking, swimming, flying, breathing, living, with a thousand movements, "so far and so far and on towards the end."

What he has to say is not only prophetic, enlightening, and above all for any citizen of the United States greatly to the point in the last four years, but it has another signal merit. The person privileged to engage in any service, however humble, for the country of *Democratic Vistas* and *Captain, My Captain*, can hardly find a page of either the poetry or the prose of Whitman which will not be as a mystic trumpet calling him on in his endeavors, consecrating

and dignifying his days as they rise from their fathomless deeps.

The treasure Whitman bestows upon us in this way is like some solid gift of three dimensions, utterly outside the customary argosies of letters. His tribute to his readers is comparable to the discoveries of scientists, of explorers or prophets or economists of genius. He might more fittingly be ranked with Bunyan or with Henry George than with his brother poets, with Coleridge or Keats. It is not that these brother poets fail to bring us argosies of very precious materials, but that they are of a totally different character, not possessed of any such social solidity, nor intended to supply us with the plain fare and daily moral sustenance of Whitman's freightage. The frankness, the delightful mixture of heroics and common-sense that Whitman provides are enough to carry you through anything. Even when the invisible future seems to be shadowed forth in the form of endless lengthy committee meetings, he enables you to greet the unseen with a cheer. Can you say this of any other poet?

On the wild shores of the jungle of democracy in which we all must travel, other poets as compared with Whitman seem to arrive bearing articles curious and delightful enough, but when seen beside the offerings of *Marches Now the War Is Over*, almost useless. It is as though they brought us hooded falcons and wreathed silver, and gowns of silk we should not lack nor gold to bind our hair—all splendid, but cumbersome for a journey through a jungle; and as though Whitman alone proffered rubber boots and mosquito netting serviceable through the trials of many a damp, clogging path and exasperating hour.

Thus in spite of the fact that the *Mystic Trumpeter* is far, far too inspiring, and the *Answerer* far too eloquent in reassurances that do not really answer the questions of democracy, yet his pragmatic value as a poet has always been enormous. In my view it would have been simply impossible for us to get on without him.

Whitman had a wonderful idea of becoming the leader of future poets, or perhaps rather of having his poetry become the quarry of future poetry—all with the thought beautifully inevitable for him that these poets would be ardent disciples in the religion of democracy. Yet, it is perhaps superfluous to say that after walking on Whitman's

land with him, and after he has bestowed on you so much of the greatest value to you, you never see after you have journeyed out of his pages, a glimpse of country of the same character in any other book.

There is this immortal and mysterious beauty in the fate of genius. What the poet has desired to give most widely will still remain most remarkably his own. The thing he shared most deeply with everybody will be his own possession imperishably. Loved, cherished, delighted in along the ways of life, the beauty he has left us is now I think not simply to be echoed on another's pages, but to be lived—a finer and more natural fortune for a creator's heritage.

III

Everyone to his own adventures as a poetry reader—or shall I say as an American poetry reader? Yet, partly on account of the considerations I have mentioned, partly for other reasons, I was bewildered when a few years ago I heard Miss Amy Lowell voicing on a lecture platform the belief that the Imagists are the direct descendants of Poe and of Whitman.

As I have read the poetry and criticisms of the Imagists these have not only moved on paths remote from Whitman's dream of acting as splendid providers for the future of democracy: but the attribution of any such simple bourgeois usefulness and plain, advisory morality to their efforts as authors would be exceedingly antipathetic and annoying to them; as though their methods had been confused with those of Chatauqua lecturers.

Then, my own interest in reading Poe is so exceedingly different from my interest in reading Whitman, that I was as confused by hearing Miss Lowell invoke them inclusively, as I might have been if she had said the Imagists were the direct descendants of Emerson and George Ade.

For me the terms of Whitman's and of Poe's communications are as far apart as the poles, Whitman expressing his conceptions by a flood of light and of explication, and Poe evoking his ideas almost by concealment, by reticence. Whitman was an open air artist; and all his poetry that I have ever read is wind-blown and drenched with sunlight. But the least verse of Poe's holds one by the magic of a beauty almost antithetic to the power that makes "any ob-

ject beautiful that is completely irradiated with light." Whitman himself has well suggested that magic—

At its best, poetic lore is like what may be heard of conversation in the dusk, from speakers far or hid, of which we get only a few broken murmurs. What is not gathered is far more—perhaps the main thing.

There is an extremely kind, old-fashioned letter by a teacher of Poe's often included in prefaces of his poems, in which the writer says that "He had a sensitive and tender heart." Out of a great gentleness and sensitiveness one may readily believe all the wild growths of the land of Poe's exquisite lyrics arise.

When one comes back from that world of purple towers and lost islands, of ethereal dances and marble plinths and columns, of sorrow and pain, of horror and glory and deathless love, one is immersed in a sense of the noble lines, the delicate modelling of the mortal soul mysteriously hallowed by its unknown fate. The earth is filled with the music of an endless, unasking patience, still and spiritualized, that accepts grief as an inevitable destiny and breathes that acceptance as the natural breath of existence. Poe speaks of "Unthought-like thoughts that are the soul of thought": and it is these that seem to sing from the echoing depths of his harmonies, his melodies, to tell a thousand wild, unfinished tales of lonely places, the sea, and space, the spirit's cloudy home. The truth that wisdom knew that said the half of music is remembered grief confides in you in a hopeless consolation through all the most beautiful of Poe's lyrics.

Perhaps he is not for very young people; and I can remember the time when *For Annie* seemed to me ridiculous. But the over-tones of what may be heard of conversation in the dusk from speakers far or hid, are unheard melodies in many years too care-free perhaps, too cheerful to understand the reality of either pain or joy, of grief or happiness. Even after one has realized, too, how much of Poe's grief, how much of his nostalgia was a contemporary literary fashion, its power of gentleness, its dignity of inner romance in making you listen for the song of the secret bird in mortal fortune, remains original and unequalled.

IV

Some of my most interesting adventures as a poetry reader have been in reading criticism written by poets.

Whitman and Poe have each given us some of the most profound and stirring work of this kind that we possess. Each of these artists has left us, concerning his hopes and fears for poetry in the jungle of a democracy, a commentary abundantly suggestive, sincere and searching. The American writer who can read unmoved either Whitman's *Poetry To-Day in America* or Poe's preface to his collected poems, or *The Poetic Principle* must be made of some material strangely phlegmatic, curiously unconcerned with the whole human value of American letters.

But not only the American writer—not only the writer who has known what it means to try to say something of the poetry of his own truth,—but the reader of poetry who has never shared the hopes and fears of this attempt, will find in these prose passages of Whitman's and of Poe's about the aim of their work on earth, the quality I have mentioned, the power that transports you in their most beautiful verse also, to a new and engulfing sense of existence.

Who will say what that nameless quality may be? You cannot I believe define poetry nor predict it with enough truthfulness to count. Your best truthfulness on the subject will arise simply from a chronicle of your enjoyment in it: and the reason why out of many years' pleasure in reading poetry of many kinds I have chosen to describe my journeys in realms as far apart as those of Homer, of Poe and of Whitman, is because these poets different as they are each possess in a high degree one of the elements I have always found most transporting. This element is musical imagination.

Needless to say that in the *Iliad* it is not only the profound turbulency and delicately ebbing silver bubbles of the *poluphloisboio thalasses*, the tones of different words, that are untranslatable, but the intricate yet clearly-marked balance of the Greek particles and connectives, the peculiar harmonies of Greek sentence structure, the impassable gulfs of differing inflection with all their infinitely shimmering modulations.

All translation of poetry somewhat traduces. It eliminates a dimension which belongs to poetry in my view rather than to prose. So that "a good prose translation"—not by any means to be undervalued—bears somewhat the relation to the original poem in its own tongue that a black and white reproduction bears to an original paint-

ing, or the relation that a photograph of a statue bears to the original marble or bronze.

The dimension I have mentioned that belongs to verse rather than to prose is the power of motion measured and recurrent. A faculty of course in which the art of letters whether prose or verse and the art of music of all manners differ from the more static representation of painting and of sculpture is surely in their capacity for revealing to us the element of continuation, of development, of change in life. A picture, a statue has its own power of expressing an immortal moment, one clear-focussed aspect of creation, the presentation of a given point in time. This point may be indeed a moment of passage. But the art of letters, the art of music, have a freer power of narrating one aspect of a subject after another, the great power of expressing continuous creation, death and infinite change by a sequence of motions, by symphonic variation, and passing from point to point.

The terms in which prose and verse relate changing aspects and moods of life have of course very different advantages: and for me, verse, recognizably ordered sound, the unconscious expectation of recurrent rhythm carries the reader along by a sense of existence which prose cannot recreate in the same degree. Verse was surely the best way of telling us about the river-god's pursuit when Arethusa arose from her couch of snows in the Acroceraunian mountains. This is an obvious instance. But verse is the best way, too, of telling us the terrible, exquisite and gaudy tale of the gradual, gradual disappearance of the City in the Sea: and only verse I think could rouse higher and higher in the reader the whirl and sweep and thrilling crescendo of *The Song of the Banner at Daybreak*.

The musical imagination of Poe, his extraordinary understanding of the peculiar melodic capacities, the over-tones of our English speech, his sense of the larger harmonies and architectonics of a poem—these are widely recognized, from the intimate, the deep-known heart of song in our simplest English words—

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than—

to the exquisite over-tones, the far-heard, mysterious bells of the narrative of—

And all my days are trances,
 And all my nightly dreams
 Are where thy dark eye glances,
 And where thy footstep gleams—
 In what ethereal dances,
 By what eternal streams.

Less widely appreciated is Whitman's musical gift as a splendid improviser of tone-poems, a leader of arias, choruses, alternating voices—the gray-brown bird, and the poet, in *When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloomed*. The bird bereft, the boy's soul and the surge of the sea in *A Word Out of the Sea*. A master of the changing motions, the long ocean-breaker rhythms of hendecasyllabics, and decasyllabics, the buoyancy of assonance, Whitman had a basic sympathy with the tonal resources of English that gives him an extraordinary sustained power in poetic composition.

The reason why I protest against having the Imagists regarded as the inheritors of Whitman and Poe is not only because these artists are not themselves exactly in a direct line of descent, not only because Whitman's view of the value of the poet's career and Poe's view of the value of the poet's art are diametrically opposed to the Imagists' apparent view, but because a leading distinction of Imagistic poetry seems to me to consist in its elimination of these very qualities in which Whitman and Poe are masters—in the power of evoking the sense of continuous motion by the melodic and tonal capacities of English, in musical imagination.

V

The excellence of Imagistic art on the other hand appears to me to lie largely in its faculty of static presentment, showing the subject in a fixed pose at a given instant of time. Not of course rhymed, the Latin and Greek verse which so often serves as the Imagists' model—and to whose world, rather than to any world of their own their poetry so often takes us—has yet its own musical atmosphere, forever different from the atmosphere in which English verse breathes, but clearly perceptible. But a leading distinction, a charm of the Imagist Anthologies for me is that their compositions all exist in some still, toneless æther, and without any musical atmosphere whatever.

I know a great claim has been made that Imagistic poetry is not unmusical, but simply written in a new verbal music,

which jangles out of tune and harsh for the ear accustomed to a different convention, as once Wagner sounded and Debussy.

But with all due respect to the claimants this parallel seems to me unjustified. The expression the Imagist collections have for the inner ear is not that of melodic unconvention, nor musical discovery whether sympathetic or dissonant, but the air and appeal of prose convention. The total effect, for me, the most novel and interesting effect of the style of the Imagist Antologies is that of a way of writing that asks you to consider it, not by listening at all to what it says, but only by looking at it.

In Imagist criticism the attempt to dispense with musical imagination in poetry is manifested in a stronger but rather different manner. Thus Mr. Ezra Pound says with disapproval in a critique on Swinburne that "he neglected the value of words as words, and was intent on their value as sound," as though the imagined sound of a word were no part of its actual value, nor a legitimate pre-occupation for a poet.

Indeed an idea is afloat somewhere in nearly all Imagist criticism that the perception of verbal music is a rather unworthy human manifestation, and that the poetry genuinely associated with thought, with culture and refinement is that conceived as though by and for the tone-deaf, or at least the hard of hearing.

This is a familiar American attitude typified for me by a lady who once observed in a conversational description of a person I had never met—"My dear, she can transpose to any key, they say. She can arrange music for any instrument in the symphony orchestra, and understands counterpoint, and all that. She is a musical girl. *Not intellectual, of course.* Though I *will* say she seems quite refined."

Mr. Pound's concessive liberalities to the art of Swinburne are much in this lady's manner. Thus he says that "We are grateful for his spirit of revolt, whatever our verbal fastidiousness," obviously using the last phrase to mean "however we may deprecate the unfortunate acuteness of his musical knowledge." He continues, too: "There is a lack of intellect in his work." I was puzzled by this remark at first. A lack of intellect in the work of the poet who could firmly comprehend and interpret by a hundred intricate and delicate modulations of English verse the

minds of Marlowe and Webster, the super-subtlety of Mary Queen of Scots, the satire of Aristophanes, the complicated, modern conception of the forward thought of the world that chords in the variations of the *Prelude*. But then I perceived that Mr. Pound used the word intellect almost exactly as my acquaintance had—not so much to denote mental activity of superior quality as to connote a commendable ignorance of music.

The term "Imagist" virtually includes in an unadmitted manner not only the verse written by Imagists but a great deal else—all their propaganda about poetry, may we not say all the politics of poetry indicated in such characteristic criticism as this. It is not against the craft of Imagists as verse-writers that one protests, neither against their praise, but against a way of poetry-reading inculcated by these politics, a way that precludes the adventure of novel understanding for the poetry-reader. For one cannot avoid the suspicion that though the authors' views are so different the cause of Miss Lowell's conception of the Imagists as direct descendants of Poe and Whitman and the cause of Mr. Pound's distress about Swinburne's poetry—its lack of intellect and its annoyance of his verbal fastidiousness—are at bottom the same.

All these remarks about the life-work of Swinburne, of Whitman and Poe seem to have nothing whatever to do with the aim of any of these masters, nor with the originality, the truth and beauty of their poetry. But they have a great deal to do with the acclaim of Imagists. Mr. Pound unconsciously seeks to exalt Imagism by refusing to admit expressive capacities of poetry outside that field of art. Miss Lowell, though more liberal to extraneous artists, seeks to exalt Imagists by claiming for them all the valuable territory in sight on the American poetical horizon and estates whose richest ore-veins of substance and style one cannot discover in the endowment of the alleged heirs.

To agree only to look, and not to listen, while you are reading Imagistic poetry is a courtesy you are glad to show to its peculiar art. But out of loyalty to Imagists, to read all poetry as though you were deaf, cannot seem an act either of scholarly, critical intelligence or of happy irresponsible adventure. Indeed nothing will deprive you of both these freedoms so completely as the custom of constantly referring the poetry of the race to the standards of some small group.

The habit of not listening to poetry while you are reading it, the habit of glancing back and forth from an artist's truth, to some standard of local measurement in your own mind, the habit of humming a tune of your own while someone else is telling you some new and delicate harmony of existence from a silent page—all these are excellent ways of extending one's ignorance, but certainly not one's knowledge of the poetry of the world: and we need it seems more than ever before the most candid, the clearest and most sympathetic knowledge we can obtain of the poetry of every country.

VI

Now that the world is being re-made, now that the world is being so rapidly internationalized, we are asking ourselves with an especial interest about the communicative power of poetry. It would not I think be hard to show that however universal the emotion it arouses the most expressive poetry we possess springs from a profound consciousness of the living genius, the actual sound of the language in which it is written. None but those who desire a dull globe of the *gleichsinnig* can desire a uniform vehicle for poetry. All those who believe in the essential rights of small nations, all those who believe in preserving in its wide-ranging, democratic variety, the truth and beauty the human race has learned on by-ways as well as on highways must feel I think the wish of treasuring as far as may be the free grace of national speech, the sense of the living word, in the art of poetry.

Since poets are the builders and makers of the world forever what will Internationalism then do for poetry? Will it make the Japanese try to write as Shakespeare wrote, or to compose in the manner of *Manhattan's Streets I Wandered, Pondering*? Will it make us try to emulate the literature of the Japanese? The better we understand them, the better they understand us, the more unlikely will it be I believe that Internationalism will do anything of this kind to poetry. A part of international imagination will surely consist just as in our intercourse with people whom we can live with and love in private life, not simply in an understanding of our points of likeness, but an appreciation of our points of difference. The globe would be a poorer place without mutual acknowledgements of qualities peerless and

unique in persons and in nations. If there is a fascination in knowing how much other people are like you, there is also an equally magnetic charm in knowing how different people are from yourself.

When one thinks in this light, of what American poetry has to offer, when one asks oneself what American poetry is, as seen against the background of the world, one believes that Internationalism will perhaps bring very little change in the best spirit of its production.

The most alluring, the most deeply-thought poetry, sung to intrigue, to relieve, to clarify to itself the life of its creator will be sung still for the same cause. That song of the secret bird will be heard above the tides of the ocean, and her notes be listened to by hearts that will hark for comfort, yes and pain, too, and the last truth they both may give to other seekers far-off and unknown; and it will sing its knowledge still when all our ways are dust and nothing left of them except that living word of the human soul immortally sounding from the page's silver silence.

This is as it has been and will always be. The song is to the singer and comes back most to him. In a mysterious universe we alone of all created things can speak and answer. We can speak and answer and the truth shall make us free.

In that free truth, greater and deeper, more intimate and close at home, too, more charged with satisfying fire, and more forcibly touched with the hard knowledge of cruelty and tears and the imminence of death, in that freer and juster truth that the newer life of the nations together may bring for us, each soul must be heard more attentively than ever before I think, for his own story: and in an understanding of that story we shall still find one of the most endeared and largest adventures of reading poetry.

EDITH FRANKLIN WYATT.